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ABSTRACT

The teaching of literature is not well understood in American schools, nor has there been any major change in conceptualizing secondary school literature instruction in the past 25 years. In addition, study of how students come to understand literature parallel to the study of the writing process is almost nonexistent. For the past few years, Judith Langer has been developing an underlying theory for the teaching of literature based on her study of the nature of literary understanding. Her studies show that during reading, there are a series of relationships the reader takes toward the text: (1) "being out and stepping into an envisionment"; (2) "being in and moving through an envisionment"; (3) "stepping back and rethinking what one knows"; and (4) "stepping out and objectifying the experience." Readers' understanding of literary texts seems to be constrained by their notions of human (or imaginary) possibility, while their understanding of non-literary texts seems to be constrained by their perceptions of the topic. The notions of stances and orientations toward meaning provide useful guidelines for teachers to use in support of students' processes of "coming to understand." (RS)

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Digest

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A New Look at Literature Instruction

by Judith Langer

The teaching of literature is not well understood in American schools. It is often considered a way to indoctrinate students into the cultural knowledge, good taste, and high culture of our society, but its role in the development of the sharp and critical mind is largely ignored. And so, when budgets are cut, literature is high on the list of expendables, and when critical thinking is in, English teachers are asked to do as everyone else, teach critical reading for particular right answers.

In secondary schools there has been no major change in conceptualizing literature instruction in the past 25 years (except for what individual teachers have been doing). While there has been extensive change in English classes, the concern has been primarily with writing. And despite the fact that more than 80% of the writing that goes on in English classes is about literature, there has been little recent research on the teaching of literature. English and language arts teachers have come to feel schizoid in their classes, using process-oriented approaches to writing, and very traditional approaches to the teaching of literature.

No research in literature has attempted to help it keep pace with what we've learned about writing theory—or learning theory. In particular, there has been virtually no study of how students come to understand literature parallel to the study of the writing process.

Across the years, scholars have made distinctions between literary and scientific thought—suggesting that together they form the multiple sources of reason we can draw upon when constructing meaning. For instance, Suzanne Langer speaks of subjective and objective realities, Louise Rosenblatt speaks of aesthetic and efferent readings, and Jerome Bruner speaks of narrative and paradigmatic thought. However, none of these has been systematically studied.

Related works suggests that literary thinking is a natural and necessary part of the well-developed intellect. A series of studies show that doctors, physicians, and lawyers use both modes of thought to solve problems. A recent study at Xerox Parc demonstrated that machine repairers use storytelling to solve their problems.

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Yet nonetheless the literary way of thinking has been largely unexplored. We know a lot about scientific, but not about literary (or subjective, or aesthetic understanding). And the teaching of literature has become “rudderless”—without a strong theory of what it's about.

For the past few years, Judith Langer has been developing an underlying theory for the teaching of literature. To do this, she has been studying the nature of literary understanding, and identifying the ways in which the understanding of literature differs from understanding other coursework. She has been using this information as a way to rethink instruction.

Her studies show that during reading, there are a series of relationships the reader takes toward the text—each adding a somewhat different dimension to the reader's growing understanding of the piece.

The four major stances in the process of understanding are:

Being Out and Stepping Into an Envisionment

In this stance, readers attempt to make initial contacts with the genre, content, structure, and language of the text by using prior knowledge, experiences, and surface features of the text to “identify” essential elements in order to begin to construct an envisionment.

Being In and Moving Through an Envisionment

In this stance, readers are immersed in their understandings, using their previously-constructed envisionments, prior knowledge and the text itself to further their creation of meaning. For the reader, meaning-making moves along with the text. In this stance, for example, the reader may be caught up in a story or may be carried along by the argument of a non-literary work.

Stepping Back and Rethinking What One Knows

In this stance, readers use their envisionments to reflect on their own previous knowledge or understandings. While prior knowledge informs their envisionments in the other stances, in this case readers use their envisionments to rethink what they already know.

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Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience

In this stance, readers distance themselves from their envisionments, reflecting on and reacting to the content, to the text, or to the reading experience itself.

These stances are not linear, can occur and recur at any point in the reading, and help us understand where to provide support in helping students move through the process.

While readers work through these stances in reading both literary and non-literary works, their orientation toward meaning—what they're after—differs substantially. Langer describes readers' orientations toward literary and nonliterary readings in the following ways:

Reaching toward a Horizon of Possibilities

During the reading of literature, the sense of the whole changes and develops as the envisionment unfolds—it exists as a constantly moving *horizon of possibilities*. These possibilities emerge out of the envisionment itself, focusing on the human situation with all its uncertainties and ambiguities—bringing to bear all the reader knows about people, situations, relationships, and feelings. The reading of literature is guided by inquisitiveness, by the opening of possibilities. Readers take each idea they read and try to understand it in terms of their sense of the whole, rather than as a stepping stone along the way. They clarify ideas as they read and relate them to the growing and changing horizon—that horizon modifies the parts and the parts modify the horizon. They do this by searching feelings, intentions, motivations, implications, assumptions, values, and attitudes.

Maintaining a Point of Reference

In non-literary contexts, on the other hand, the sense of a the whole provides a steady *reference point*. As the envisionment unfolds, the new details may clarify the nature of the whole, but they rarely change it. The reader relies on the constancy or sense of the whole in order to monitor initial understandings (or misunderstandings) of the details. Thus, although readers of both literary and non-literary texts continually maintain a sense of the whole, the nature of this whole is somewhat different. Their understanding of literary texts seems to be constrained by their notions of human (or imaginary) possibility, while their understanding of non-literary texts seems to be constrained by their perceptions of the topic.

The reading of literature, then, involves a great deal of critical thought—particularly characterized by the exploration of possibilities. But it is different from the kinds of thinking that students engage in when they read science or social studies pieces, where the pattern is to use the content they read to gain facts.

These notions, both the stances and orientations toward meaning, provide useful guidelines for teachers to use in support of students' processes of "coming to understand."

For further information, see ED 315 755, Langer, Judith (1989), *The Process of Understanding Literature*, Report Series 2.1. May be purchased from Center for the Learning & Teaching of Literature, 1400 Washington Avenue, University at Albany, Albany, NY 12222, price \$5.00.

Additional Readings

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